

Blood Ties

She was picking at wounds she knew she should have left alone to heal. In fact, they had healed once already, so maybe she should have seen it as picking at scars. She could practically see it, marks on her brain being ripped open yet again, or it could have been her heart she supposed. It didn't really matter how it was worded though, in the end none of it was good. And she knew that. At least, she thought she did.

Of course, if she really knew that then she wouldn't be standing in front of this familiar, red, door wringing her hands. The doorbell hadn't been touched yet, so there was still time to leave and pretend she had never attempted anything. Her boot-clad feet stayed rooted to the faded wood of the porch, however. She stared at the tiny button pompously labeled "Doorbell" near the doorknob. It seemed to be staring back, daring.

The young woman had remembered the door being a much more vivid red and there had been flowers planted all along the large white house, seventeen pansies she thought. The winter explained the absence of flowers, and time explained the dull paint. She supposed that twenty years would have changed a lot of things; she wasn't sure if she could handle what would be found inside. But that meant she would have to try to get inside, which she still wasn't sure she should do. Pulling her pale hands up to her mouth to blow on them, four quick puffs, she wished for gloves. Her dry skin burned in the harsh wind, lips cracking more and more with every second she stood in front of this suburban home. Running her tongue over the bottom lip, she tried to notch each little tender groove. Five cracks maybe. She pulled in the lip to gnaw at it. Now there were six.

"Can I help you?" a man's voice said from behind her.

She let go of the bottom lip to begin the process over again with the top, taking her

time on turning around, not sure what she wanted to find. Maybe it would be some concerned stranger who noticed her. Maybe it would be a police officer answering a call made by a nosy neighbor. It wasn't either though; she recognized his voice even after all this time.

He wasn't nearly as tall as she recalled. His dark brown hair, the same shade as hers, was getting gray at the temples. His stomach stuck out now, rather than the trim build she had expected. This could have also been from the heavy coat he was wearing. The man was leaning against a snow shovel, apparently preparing to dig out his driveway from the several inches of snow that had fallen the previous night. He squinted up at her through blue eyes, uncertain.

"Hello, Dale."

She was surprised to feel an inner calm as the words came out. She was getting better at keeping calm, which made her proud. Instead of racing like she expected, her heart rate stayed even. Her voice didn't tremble. She descended the porch stairs, never taking her eyes off of him. The man she had waited so long to see-- to confront. No, no, that wasn't right. Confrontation was not what needed to be done here, she reminded herself. He would win if there was confrontation.

The last step was skipped. It was bad luck to step on the final step; she couldn't remember the reason why anymore but knew it was true. Dale continued to squint at her now that she was in better light. She watched as a flicker went through his eyes. Then there was indecision. Finally, there was shock.

"Aren't you going to say hello to your daughter?" Her voice stayed even again, making her confidence increase all the more.

The shovel fell and hit an ice covered patch of cement with a smack. She did not flinch at the sound, but he did. She narrowed her eyes at him but then stopped herself, jamming her hands in the pockets of her black coat just for something to do. Dale's hands hung loosely at his sides as he stared at her, mouth slightly slack with confusion and disbelief. The woman considered moving closer, the better to see him squirm. Her boots stayed still though; ten steps away seemed safe enough.

“Katie?”

Unlike the shovel, she couldn't stop herself from wincing at the name. He didn't know that she didn't answer to that anymore. Still, it rang through—that name with his voice. She was suddenly twelve years old again, transported to another time when this house had been home.

Katie had been playing with her dolls upstairs in her room. She was in the middle of undressing her favorite one; it had been called Maggie. The doll had hung limply in her hand, naked and exposed while she chose which dress to put on it next. The other one had gotten dirty. That was when her dad had burst into the room and grabbed her arm, saying harsh and unhappy words.

The doll fell on the floor; she remembered how the pretty red hair had fanned out when it landed. He told her to leave it behind when she attempted to pull away in order to pick it up. He dragged her down the stairs so quickly she lost her footing and stumbled several times, tearing the new skirt her mama had bought. She almost forgot to jump the last step when they approached it. She didn't cry, didn't say anything, just continued to try to break free from the steel grip.

Maggie was upstairs, naked and alone. Didn't he see that Katie needed to go and get her? The doll needed a dress, and she needed Katie. Her fighting began to get stronger. He didn't understand.

“Now listen, Katie,” her dad had said. “You're going away for a while. There's a doctor who's gonna make you all better. We'll come get you when you're better.”

Katie stopped struggling long enough to stare at her father, not fully comprehending but feeling a certainty in her bones. She wasn't sick; there would be no real doctor. And they wouldn't come and get her. That part was certain. The dead look in his eyes and the absence of her mother said it all.

She tried to look dejected and confused. They couldn't send her away if there was no reason. And her parents *wanted* to send her away. And her dad was keeping Maggie away just so she'd make a scene.

“If this is about Fluffy, I—“

“We won’t talk about that. Now let’s get going.” He began to push her towards the door.

“I want my doll.” Her voice came out hard.

“There’s no time. We need to go.” Her father’s hand clamped down on her wrist even tighter as though in anticipation.

If a fight was what he wanted, then that’s what he’d get. With another great heave, she tried to escape back to her room. She wasn’t strong enough though and was pulled another few feet towards the door. Letting out a scream of frustration, she lashed backwards towards her dad’s face. She felt her nails connect with his cheek. The grin on her face lasted only a second before she forced it to vanish. If he saw it, then she’d never get Maggie.

“I’m sorry.” The words came out sounding mechanical.

“Dammit!” Dale clutched at his now red cheek but continued to pull his daughter. “Who knows what’s on your hands!”

“You don’t understand! She needs me! I have to count it out! I have to make sure she’s right!”

“Just get in the car.” They were out of the door now.

“You make me like this!” she cried out. “I don’t need to leave!”

She was pushed into the backseat of the car. She pounded at the window and screamed in rage. Her father got in to the driver’s seat and turned the radio up, adjusting the rearview mirror so he could keep her in his line of sight. She wanted to claw his eyes out, but instead turned to look at her childhood home, never to be visited again.

The woman shook away the thoughts with anger and glowered at the now older version of the man from her memory. Dale was still staring at her, his eyes wide. She didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of hearing her speak again just yet, so they stood a while in silence.

“We- We thought-“

She failed at her attempt at keeping quiet by cutting across him. “You thought what? That I had died? How would you know? You knew *nothing*.”

Dale took a step away from her as though the words stung him. She worked hard to

pull in her fury. That was not why she was here, she chided herself. *Don't give them what they want.* She repeated this to herself over and over again until her breathing slowed and her fists became unclenched. Twenty breaths, twenty clenches. There would have been blood in her palms if her nails hadn't been so gnawed down.

"I'd like to see Janice, too." She spoke each word distinctly so her anger did not show in her voice quite as much.

Dale looked toward the house reflexively. His eyes then darted back to her in a quick and somewhat guilty manner. The fear was practically a stench on him.

"She's not home."

Her eyes narrowed. "Don't lie to me, Dale. You owe me that much."

"Kat--"

"Don't call me that. I go by Elena now." The name sounded pretty and untraceable to her ears.

"Elena, then." His face turned pleading. "I don't think your mother can handle this."

"She could handle dumping her kid in an institution, why not this?" Her words were harsh and she liked it that way.

"Please. If you want to talk to me, that's fine. Just leave Jan out of it." His hand went out as some sort of appeal.

It wouldn't be that easy. Elena had taken the plunge by arriving here, so there might as well be as much closure as possible. Her mother had done even more harm than her father as far as she was concerned. The woman hadn't even had the guts to be there when Elena was taken. There had been no goodbye. Elena's last memory of the woman was of her crying two days before the event, saying something about needing to visit family for a while until things got sorted out. There were no words of apology or love spoken, just a simple statement of leaving. Elena didn't believe those nineteen tears meant anything either.

"If it's not now, it will be later." She stared at him unblinking so he understood how serious she was.

Dale lowered his head and stared at his snow dusted boots. He didn't look up when he spoke again. "Can I at least have time to warn her?"

“Don’t think I’m stupid enough to let you have time to call the cops.”

He sighed and began to move up the driveway towards the back of the house. He left the shovel lying on the cement. Elena bent and picked it up before following, letting it drag loudly behind her. The cool wooden handle felt good in her hands; there was complete control again. Twenty-seven steps to the house. She leaned the shovel against the side of the house next to the backdoor, a little sad to let it go. Dale stared at it for a moment with a look of resignation before opening the squeaky screen door and then walking through the main threshold.

Elena marveled at how the simple smell of the kitchen brought back so many memories. The way she used to hide under the kitchen table when visitors came (not that many had), pretending she couldn’t be seen. How she had watched her mother cook meals on holidays, carefully dressing and stuffing the raw turkey so methodically that Elena found it mesmerizing. Ten handfuls of bread crumbs made it just right. Just down the hall was the living room where she knew a deer head hung from the far wall, ready to stare at her with knowing eyes like it had when she was a child. Under the deer would be the old recliner that had forever been claimed by that damn cat with the stubby tail that always hissed at her. A slightly contented smile touched her lips when she realized it must have been long gone by now.

This house knew many secrets. Too many. She was surprised to find these memories weren’t as painful as she expected them to be. In fact, most of them could not even be recalled. Up the thirteen stairs would be her old room; she wondered what it looked like now. Would all of her old things still be there?

“Janice?” Dale called as he shrugged out of his coat and walked towards the hallway. “We have a... visitor.”

“Who is it, Hun?” Her shuffling footsteps could be heard from the living room.

She came into view, looking much frailer than Elena could have ever predicted. Her once blonde hair was now almost white and her skin sagged in unflattering ways. She looked forty years older rather than twenty. The lighting wasn’t very good in the small kitchen, and it took Janice a lot longer to recognize her daughter than it had Dale. Elena watched as the

woman tried to piece it together. Dale went to his wife and took her arm, looking concerned as Janice's breathing began to escalate. Eleven breaths in ten seconds. Elena tried not to wince.

"Is it?" She looked at him with eyes half crazed before returning them to stare at her daughter.

"Yes," he said as he grabbed a chair and gently guided the woman into it.

Elena watched silently, feeling more distance from the couple in front of her than she had even thought. Janice's shock was nothing. Nothing but more fuel for the power that Elena could feel swelling in her chest. She stood straighter and stared back into the woman's eyes with a sort of challenge in them. This would be the end of it. They wouldn't get the best of her this time. She was in much better control now. She would conquer this situation and finally move on with her life. *Easy*. Sixteen breaths.

Tears began to leak from Janice's tired looking eyes. Dale placed his hand on her shoulder and looked up at Elena with an accusatory glare. Elena ignored him. He wasn't the one she was really concerned with. She wanted the woman that was once called her mother to speak.

"We thought you were... gone." Janice's voice shook.

"You mean 'wished,'" Elena corrected.

Janice shook her head and dabbed at her eyes. "When they told us you'd run off, I said you'd be fine. You were tough. But the longer they didn't find you, the more I started to wonder... But where have you *been*?"

She had been everywhere and nowhere after her escape. Thirty-three places so far. An odd number, which she would have to fix. Finding places to live had never been all that difficult for her. People trusted the pretty little girl who looked lost and confused. They took her in, cared for her. Not knowing she'd be gone as soon as there was any sense of bringing in the authorities. When she got older, it was even easier to find men who would allow her to share their homes. She bounced all over the country, doing what she had to do to keep herself anonymous.

This year, she was living with a rich bachelor, engaged to be married. But he was getting

boring and suspicious of where his money was going. She would have to move on soon. She might have stayed too long as it was. Yes, she would have to get rid of him.

“Why?” Elena whispered.

“Well nineteen years is a long time for a person to live on their own, especially when you start at thirteen.”

“Six thousand eight hundred and twenty-six days,” the woman corrected. “But that wasn’t the ‘why’ I was asking.”

The two women stared at each other for a long time in some kind of silent understanding. Elena had come here for answers. There was no room for anything else. Janice reached into the pocket of the ratty robe she was wearing and pulled out a small wooden cross, turning it over and over in her hands. Elena could tell it was a habit. The woman wasn’t thinking about it. Elena wondered when they had started to get religious.

“You were troubled. Surely, you know that by now.”

“I was quiet, awkward, misunderstood maybe. None of that meant I should have been locked up. You didn’t even *try*.” Elena spat the words she had wanted to say for close to two decades with a sense of both triumph and anxiety.

“There was more to it than that and you know it. You scared me. I didn’t know what to do with you. After what happened to the cat, I just didn’t feel right about anything. I mean, Katie, you had-“

“Don’t call me that! And I didn’t do anything to that cat that wasn’t necessary.”

Dale stepped forward but kept a hand on his wife. “You cut off its tail. You cut it into twelve fucking pieces.”

Elena waved her hand around as though this were a small, unimportant matter and began to walk around the cramped and overheated room like a caged animal. Janice and Dale watched her nervously, tears still shining bright in Janice’s eyes. Elena’s eyes were dry. She didn’t cry, believing herself incapable.

She tried to get a handle on the anger building inside her chest like venom. They would bring up the damn cat just to see her reaction. After all, they had brought in the animal to taunt her from the beginning. Constantly hissing, lashing its long tail back and

forth whenever it saw her. She had fixed that. She had taken control of it.

Elena swallowed repeatedly and focused on the interior of the room to calm herself. She took in the outdated refrigerator, the tacky nature painting of ducks flying over a lake, the mismatched cutting knives in their wooden block. Seven knives in a block meant for eight. She clenched her hands into fists again.

“You could have at least said goodbye. Come to visit.” Her voice was soft now, hurt.

“We thought it would make things worse.” It was Dale who spoke now because Janice couldn’t even look at her daughter.

“That makes sense.” Her voice stayed quiet as she stared off in the distance, not keeping track of what was really being said. She was losing her hold.

One, two, three ducks in the painting. Seven, eight, nine magnets on the refrigerator. Five, six, seven knives in the block.

“Kat- Sweetie, we never meant to hurt you. We just... weren’t capable of taking care of your needs. We thought we were helping,” Janice said pleadingly.

“Helping,” Elena repeated.

Elena wanted to laugh, cackle. Instead, she continued to stare off, deep in thought. So they called it “helping” when they set her up to fail. Making everything uneven, uncontrollable. Yes, she supposed they would see it that way. Her hands began to shake.

“Yes.” Janice seemed to be feeling hope. She reached out to touch Dale’s arm, the tiny cross clutched in the other hand.

“When did that start?” Elena pointed at it, trying to distract her mind. One cross.

“Your father made it for me after you left. I prayed for you every night.”

The snap in Elena’s brain was practically audible. Her vision blurred and her face contorted into a fierce snarl. “You *prayed*? That was how you were ‘helping’ me?” Her voice rose to an almost shriek.

Janice recoiled and the cross fell to the floor. Dale stepped forward as though to shield his wife. Elena pulled at her hair and slowed her breathing again. It took a lot longer this time. This wasn’t the way, she told herself. There was a better way to fix all of this; she just couldn’t remember what it was anymore. Her parents watched her with weary eyes as

she grappled with her thoughts.

“Do you know what today is?”

Jane sniffed and looked up, making eye contact for the first real time. “It’s the anniversary.”

Elena nodded. That was the real reason she had come back after all. Twenty years since May 15, 1997. Seven thousand three hundred and five days of hell. That would end today. She didn’t know why she hadn’t seen it before. She had been somewhat content to forget the doll, her parents, everything they had done. The doctors had helped her that much, at least in the beginning. She had moved on, found order and balance elsewhere in her life. Found ways to control things before they ever could get out of hand. But once she started to do the math, she realized she wouldn’t be free of it. That day meant something. 05-15-1997.

$5+15+1997=2017$	$2+0+1+7=10$	$1+0=1$
$5+1+5+1+9+9+7=37$	$3+7=10$	$1+0=1$

It all came down to one. One day. One event. One moment. And that one had changed everything.

It needed to be removed—taken back. That was the only way. She just wasn’t quite sure how to do it yet, but it had to be done. So she waited for the right year. 2017. That was what the math indicated after all. Exactly twenty years since. It could be forgotten, reverted to zero. She was certain of it.

All of the math made her memory get the better of her again. Katie was in a room decorated in white and stainless steel. A tall, bearded man sat across from her at the silver colored table, writing vigorously in his notebook. The child’s legs swung back and forth from the chair that was too big for her, tiny hands plucking at the uncomfortable white uniform they had put her in.

“Now, Katie, tell me about your bedroom. What kind of things are in there?” The man looked at her expectantly, his eager pen poised to write.

“My dolls are in there.”

“Really? Tell me about them. What do they look like?”

“Can I have my dolls?”

“You have dolls in your room here.”

“It’s not the same.” Her eyes stared down at the table.

“Why don’t you tell me about those dolls? Why aren’t they the same?” The pen made scratching sounds.

“One thousand two hundred and twelve.”

The pen stopped. “What does that number mean?”

She looked up at him for the first time. “I want to go home.”

Elena shook her head to get the thoughts to stop. Her pacing picked up again, even more agitated this time. The parents watched. Calm. Calm. Calm. *Calm*.

One cross on the floor. Three ducks in the painting. Nine magnets. Thirty-three places. Thirteen stairs. Seven knives. One day.

They had known she was coming. How else could they have planned out so many odd numbers? They wanted her to snap, wanted to prove to her that she really was crazy, out of control. But they didn’t think she could go through with it. Didn’t think she could erase that day and take it all back.

She stopped walking. “You know what I think?”

The couple stared at their daughter in silence. Something in her voice had changed. There didn’t seem to be any human in it anymore. Elena lifted her hand and let it casually drift towards the knife block that had been calling to her since she had walked into the house.

“I think that if you want a crazy daughter, you should get one.”

The knife was dripping, leaving a trail of red up the stairs and into her room. It hung in her hand without purpose. She had forgotten it was even there. She was instead staring at her childhood room, which looked almost exactly the same as it had twenty years ago.

The day was almost erased. Its existence was already fading. There really was only one thing left to do.

She knew what she was looking for and it didn’t take long to find it. The doll was in

the toy chest, almost unrecognizable even though it was obviously her due to the nakedness. They had left her naked this whole time. The hair was no longer a vivid red, but black and matted into a clump. Exactly one thousand two hundred and twelve hairs, or so she hoped. The woman cocked her head as she picked up the doll and touched the tresses; they came apart in dried clumps.

The hair had been much prettier when the blood was fresh, but there was still enough to count.